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Understanding the Significance of the Teenage Mother in Contemporary Parenting Culture

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Abstract

This paper attempts to understand the prominence given to teenage pregnancy in policy discussions since the late-1990s by contextualising it within a broader analysis of the contemporary 'culture of parenting'. The emerging field of parenting culture studies has begun to develop an analysis of the key features of policy, practice and informal culture. Three key concepts are discussed to shed an alternative light on the issue of teenage pregnancy and parenthood with the hope of further developing the healthy debate that has emerged in recent years in response to policy priorities: the development of 'parental tribalism' whereby differing parental choices and behaviour become a site for identity formation; the idea of a deficit at the level of parenting and intimate familial relationships; the reconceptualising of the parent as an autonomous, authoritative adult to a more infantilised imagining. The teenage mother, herself neither adult nor child, becomes emblematic of these developments.

Keywords: Teenage Pregnancy; Parenting; Sexuality; Adulthood; Family Policy

Introduction

1.1 This paper attempts to understand the prominence given to teenage pregnancy in policy discussions since the late-1990s by contextualising it within a broader analysis of the contemporary 'culture of parenting'. The emerging field of parenting culture studies has begun to develop an analysis of the key features of policy, practice and informal culture surrounding the raising of children. Three concepts are discussed to shed an alternative light on the healthy debate that has emerged in recent years in response to the policy prioritisation of teenage pregnancy. First the development of 'parental tribalism' whereby differing parental choices have become a site for identity formation is explored in relation to teenage motherhood. Next we move on to consider the teenage mother as the exemplar of the idea of a deficit at the level of parenting and intimate familial relationships. Finally we consider how the focus on teenage mothers has played an important role in shifting the status of parent away from that of an autonomous, authoritative adult towards a more infantilised conceptualisation.

Background

2.1 Since the late twentieth century in British politics and culture the teenage mother has acquired considerable prominence as a symbol of social decline, social failure or social backwardness. The Conservative government in the 1990s raised the threat of social decline through the politicisation of the single mother, with an aggressive rhetoric against falling moral standards, particularly amongst the 'underclass'. This rhetoric was altered by New Labour following their 1997 election victory in line with a more optimistic national mood and resonant with traditional Labour concerns for social justice. The Britain of 'Cool Britannia' was re-branded as a youthful, socially and sexually open-minded, multicultural place rather than a backward-looking nation, past its best, struggling to cope with social change. Issues such as inequality, unemployment and poverty were re-framed within the concept of 'social exclusion', which depicted those experiencing such social problems as unfairly 'excluded' from the potential opportunities of the new Britain. Individuals and communities who were not living the 'Cool Britannia' lifestyle were cast, in sympathetic rather than condemnatory terms, as a social and cultural 'residuum', left behind by the post-industrial economy, in need of education and support to take advantage of the opportunities of the 'creative' economy or liberalised lifestyles. In this context, reducing the number of teenage pregnancies was identified as a key target in bringing the 'excluded' into the 'included'.

2.2 Teenage parenthood was, and still is, indisputably associated with poorer areas and poorer families and has been argued to be both a symptom and a cause of social exclusion. The 'teenage pregnancy problem' partially referred to unplanned conceptions, attributed to individuals' inadequate knowledge about sex and contraception and a wider dysfunctional sexual culture, but was particularly vigorously embodied in the image of the multiply dysfunctional yet pitiable teenage mother, excluded from education, trapped in dysfunctional gender relations and a culture of low expectations, inadequately prepared for life by her own parents and destined to transmit her deficiencies onto her particularly vulnerable child. In the post-1997 discourse about teenage pregnancy, the previously right-wing idea of a cycle of deprivation perpetuated by morally deficient individuals was re-articulated in terms of cultural or psycho-social deficiencies, in particular, local cultures of deprivation and dysfunctional parenting behaviour. The idea that teenage mothers produce daughters who will themselves become teenage mothers provided a particularly vivid exemplar of the intergenerational transmission of deprivation. Addressing teenage motherhood in order to 'save' girls and their children from disadvantage and to prevent threats to the future well-being of society, was given well-funded policy form by the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy, launched in 1999 from the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU, 1999).

2.3 The teenage pregnancy strategy was a popular initiative, welcomed by both Left and Right in politics and the media, by sexual health professionals and gender equity advocates. The strategy also inspired, and underpinned the funding of, a considerable amount of new research from the academic community some of which was critical of the strategy's aims and effects. In particular, the balance in the strategy between the twin aims of preventing teenage pregnancy and supporting teenage parents has been criticised for potentially stigmatising teenage mothers while offering too little real support (Arai, 2009; Duncan et al 2010). Critics have also disputed whether teenage pregnancy is a problem at all, challenging the strategy's evidence-based claims that teenage parenthood in and of itself causes or exacerbates disadvantage, is a public health problem, or produces poorer outcomes in children, and counter-posing the positive experiences of young parenthood found among many teenage parents with the very pessimistic account provided by policy (Duncan et al, 20010; Arai, 2009; Seamark and Lings, 2004; Lawlor and Shaw 2002). Both of these critiques have been useful in opening up an important debate about the efficacy of State interventions which target the behaviour of individuals or communities identified as problematic rather than addressing bigger political or structural questions. They have also given validity to the individual, family and community meanings attached to having children, which have tended to be excluded from the policy construction of the offspring of teenage parents as overwhelmingly bearing negative economic and social costs rather than any positive human potential.

2.4 Recent instances where critical research has been picked up by the media have indicated two potential limitations with the critique as it currently stands. One, in arguing against the problematisation of teenage parents, 'the problem' can sometimes be re-located in other populations, for example, older mothers or middle-class mothers. Two, in challenging the idea that teenage motherhood is a social problem or a problem for individuals, there is a risk of relativising the essence of the parent-child relationship: that it is a relationship of love and guidance between an autonomous adult and a dependent child. It is argued here that to understand why these responses are particularly problematic at the present moment, we need to look at teenage pregnancy through the wider lens of an understanding of 'parenting culture' (Lee et al, 2010). Parenting culture studies has developed some categories of analysis that are useful in understanding why teenage pregnancy has gained such political and cultural prominence in the recent period and the particular characteristics of its problematisation today. Three concepts in particular will be worked through: first the development of 'parental tribalism', a cultural development whereby private, parental behaviour becomes a significant site for the formation of identity; second the prevalence of the idea that a widespread deficit in intimate relations underpins contemporary social problems and third, the redefinition of parenthood in a more infantilised form, with the migration of parental authority to experts and the State.

Teenage motherhood and parenting identity

3.1 The idea of 'parental tribalism' (Hoffman 2010), descriptive of a tendency among individuals to form their identities through the way they parent, or perhaps more precisely, through differentiating themselves from the way some parents parent and identifying with others, can help us to make sense of the prominence given to teenage motherhood in the recent period. This can also help to explain the sometimes surprisingly contradictory meanings attached to teenage motherhood, despite a policy approach that could be characterised as exhibiting a 'zero-tolerance' towards it (Macvarish, 2010). According to Hoffman, the focus on identities reflects adult needs for security and belonging and, although the child appears to be symbolically central, in fact 'the cultural politics of parents' self-definition have eclipsed a concern with the needs of children' (Hoffman, 2010). This means that there is a frailty and sometimes hostility in real or imagined encounters between parents, where the parenting behaviour of one can either reinforce or threaten the identity of another. What is noticeable in contemporary mothers' descriptions of their parenting experiences is that many feel stigmatised or assume a defensive stance about their parenting choices, even those apparently making officially sanctioned choices. For example, some breastfeeding mothers express the view that society still sees breastfeeding as abnormal, despite the fact that they are very much swimming with the tide of official advice (Faircloth, 2010), while formula-feeding mothers express guilt and a need to 'rescue' their 'failed' identity as mothers (Lee and Bristow, 2009). There are many descriptions, particularly from the US, of both 'stay-at-home' and 'out-at-work' mothers talking about feeling 'got at' by other mothers, and feeling the need to justify their choices, an experience captured by American author Leslie Morgan Steiner as the 'Mommy wars' (2006).

3.2 Unsurprisingly, given their official elevation as likely parental disasters, teenage mothers also describe feeling publicly scrutinised and attracting hostile reactions, but in their accounts too, the expectation of judgement is often worse than the reality. There are undoubtedly very strong negative connotations attached to young motherhood, exacerbated by additional prejudices against working class mothers (Gillies, 2006 and 2008) and uncontrolled female sexuality. However, these can be confused and

contradictory, and operate differently at different levels of experience. Ambivalence about abortion, varying across different communities (Lee et al, 2004) combines with a validation of an ideal of intensive motherhood to make it possible for the teenage mother to form an identity through defying the negative stereotype of sexual fecklessness to become sympathetically viewed as someone who sacrifices her freedom for the sake of her child. For example, a girl who has a baby can be more validated than one who is known to have had one, or especially more than one, abortion. In many respects, today's teenage mothers are experiencing a considerably lesser degree of stigmatisation than a young, unmarried mother of the 1960s or 1970s. They are able to keep their babies, continue at school, expect welfare support and can be validated for 'struggling through' as single mums. The teenage mother can be respected by her family for making a brave choice and viewed with a mix of sympathy and admiration in some cultural or media portrayals. Even though there is undoubtedly political and social disapproval of teenage pregnancy as a problem, it has also been cast as a 'tragedy' rather than as a 'sin' (Arai, 2009), as 'risky' rather than morally 'wrong' and the teenage mother is not held morally responsible for her behaviour, rather she is cast as a conglomeration of dysfunctions (Macvarish, 2009).

3.3 When the academic critique of teenage pregnancy policy has been picked up by journalists and cultural commentators, there is often a tendency to 'rescue' the reputation of teenage mothers at the expense of other mothers. For example, a recent article in the Observer newspaper argued that teenage mothers have an enviably carefree approach to child-rearing, unlike older, middle-class mothers who tend to pressurise their children into fulfilling their own ambitions (Observer, 14 February, 2010). Mothers who 'leave it too late' to get pregnant and therefore require infertility treatment or special medical care for their babies on the National Health Service are sometimes compared unfavourably with younger mothers who have babies during the years of 'optimal' reproductive health. Other commentators have tended to pose the poor, struggling teenage mother as possessing a purity lacking in wealthier, working or middle class mothers who are financially able to define their transition to parenthood partially through consumerism. Teenage mothers themselves, whose views have been elicited in the extensive qualitative research (Arai, 2009, Duncan et al 2010, Cater and Coleman, 2006, Seamark and Lings 2004) conducted with them since they have become policy targets, sometimes counter-pose themselves to uptight older mothers, who lack the energy to play with their children or middle-class mothers who would rather return to their careers than stay at home with their babies (Billings and Macvarish, 2007). The attempt by sympathetic commentators to 'rescue' the teenage mother's reputation meets here with the teenage mother's need to reconstruct for herself a socially-affirmed identity following her 'failure' to abstain from sex or to heed 'safe sex' advice. The value placed on 'intensive motherhood' (Hays, 1996) creates an opportunity for young mothers to resist calls for them to go out to work or re-enter full-time education after the birth of their child and potentially rationalises the lack of real opportunities available to them to earn a living or pursue educational ambitions.

3.4 The way in which teenage motherhood is problematised contains lessons for other mothers or would-be mothers. The teenage mother is described as being less likely to take adequate care of herself or the foetus during pregnancy, more likely to smoke and drink, less likely to eat a healthy diet, and less likely to access antenatal services. When these inadequacies are highlighted, they inevitably reinforce the 'right' behaviour of mature, responsible mothers. The pregnant teenager who 'redeems' herself today does not do so through marrying the father of her child, but through taking on board health guidelines and demonstrating her commitment to the health of her future child. Teenage mothers frequently talk of how they have given up risky behaviour such as drinking, smoking or drug-taking since becoming pregnant (Billings and Macvarish, 2007). The teenage mother who rears her child within the recommendations of contemporary parenting expertise can even be cast as heroic; struggling against the odds to do the right thing.

Teenage motherhood and the parenting deficit

4.1 A second feature of the contemporary culture of parenting we will consider is the idea that a major determinant of social problems is a parenting deficit. The history of the 'policing of families' (Donzelot, 1979), in particular mothers, who were not regarded as up to the job of child-rearing, is well-documented and reveals that those deemed deficient were treated as deviant and denied the privacy and autonomy afforded to the majority. As well as attempting to reintroduce order to chaotic families, the policing of mothers allegedly lacking in the intelligence, morality or maternal instinct to care for their children served as a lesson in what appropriate family life was supposed to look like. The norm was therefore reinforced of parents as sources of order and authority within the home, responsible for the physical and emotional care, moral development and socialisation of their offspring until they reached physical and emotional maturity.

4.2 It has been argued that in the late twentieth century we have seen a move away from modernity's reliance on the family as a socially-supported institution entrusted in the majority of cases to raise children, relatively untouched by State intervention in the intimacy of the parent-child relationship (Parton 2006; Furedi 2008). A new model of the family has developed which individualises the family to its component parts of parent and child and is less trusting of the parent as a mediator between child and State. Rather, it is argued, the State identifies directly with the imagined welfare of the child (Reece, 2006) and sidelines the parent. This de-centring of the parent was clearly articulated in 2007 by Secretary of State for Health, Alan Johnson, in his introduction to the 'Every Parent Matters' report,

> Government needs to consider carefully its role in enabling all parents to play a full and positive part in their children's learning and development. We want to create conditions where more parents can engage as partners in their children's learning and development, from birth, through the school years and as young people make the transition to adulthood. (Johnson, 2007)

4.3 Here we can see that parents in general, not just 'problem' parents, are cast as secondary players in the raising of their children, to be brought into their children's lives by the prior 'partner', the State. The justification for this demotion of parents lies in the apparent difficulty of raising children in the twenty-first

century. Although, according to Johnson, 'being a parent is – and should be – an intensely personal experience and parents can be effective in very different ways', they are inadequately qualified for the task of raising children in the face of 'a growing understanding, evidenced from research, about the characteristics of effective parenting.' (Johnson, 2007). The minister also claimed that parents recognise this skill deficiency, leading to a demand from as many as '75 per cent of parents' for expert-led advice and support. This perspective can also be found in the words of the current Conservative Education Minister, Michael Gove, who, while Shadow Children, Schools and Families Secretary, said on BBC Radio 4's Today programme;

> We all know that it is in the first few years of a child's life that the greatest strain is placed on the family's household income. One of the things we want to do is say the State can be there in practical, human-centred ways to help people cope with difficult times. One of the things we are particularly keen to do is to expand the system of health visitors. Health visitors are almost one of the friendliest faces of the State. What they do is they ensure that before and after childbirth there is a trained professional there in order to help mother in what can be a time of great strain and tension, cope with the arrival of a new child. (Gove, 30 September, 2008 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7643535.stm>)

4.4 The birth of a child, historically given meaning as a joyful cause for celebration, is here described only as a 'time of great strain and tension'. The parent (in this case the mother) requires State support not just to learn how to physically care for an infant but to 'cope' with becoming a parent.

4.5 The re-conceptualisation of family life as fraught with difficulty and potentially harmful rather than natural or normal, opens up the practice of raising children to claims that evidence-based risk-managing skills and techniques can, and should, be applied to the task (Macvarish 2010; Smeyers 2008; Furedi, 2008; Clarke, 2006). It is not just that risk is assumed to be harmful or that responsibility for risk-management is individualised to the parent, but that the number of perceived risks has massively expanded and the capacity of the parent to manage those risks sensibly is doubted (Lowe and Lee, 2009; Macvarish, 2010; Kukla, 2005). The myriad ways in which parental behaviour is held responsible for child outcomes suggests that few parents could be expected to avoid posing at least some level of risk to their child. The threat posed by parents is partly physical with regard to the child's health, for example by failing to breastfeed the baby or over-feeding the older child, but also emotional or psychological through failing to bond, exercising inadequate or excessive discipline, failing to develop a pedagogical relationship with the child or pushing the older child too hard to achieve academically.

4.6 In a context where raising children is so potentially risky, the transition to motherhood and to a lesser extent, fatherhood, have increasingly become defined by submitting to 'rules' of behaviour that define the foetus and child as 'at-risk' and the parent as overwhelmingly responsible for the foetus and child's healthy physical and emotional development. The projection of harm also extends into the future adult life of the child with long-term health outcomes increasingly attributed to infant diet and future emotional and social success attributed to parental behaviour. The most problematic parents are those who do not recognise this, and are therefore defined as 'hard to reach', meaning that they are reluctant to engage with health, education, or other child welfare professionals. They stand in contrast to the majority of parents described by Alan Johnson and Michael Gove above, as demanding more State services, as struggling to negotiate the pressures of contemporary family life and as being more isolated than previous generations of parents. What these two types of family have in common is a presumed vulnerability in the face of social change, the difference between them is that the former is seen to exacerbate the vulnerability of the latter by producing socially threatening offspring who drag down educational achievement in schools, are violent or who are a drain on resources. Although the individual parent is cast as the ultimate determinant of their child's future, and parenting in general is described as the most important mediator between individual action and social stability or progress, the high risks of inadequate parenting mean that the task of child-rearing must be undertaken in a supportive (mono-directional) partnership with the State. Parton (2006) describes how our anxious relationship to an uncertain future, embodied in the vulnerability of childhood, allows an 'intensification in the government of childhood'.

4.7 For New Labour, the tendency to universalise the problem of parenting emerged in part from the attempt to distance itself from associations with the previous Conservative government's aggressive rhetorical attacks on particular groups, most obviously, single mothers. To avoid alienating Labour supporters and deterring the 'hard-to-reach' from engaging with State services, New Labour shied away from stigmatising teenage parents in the 'old-fashioned' moral discourse of marriage and sex, instead problematising teenage pregnancy through the language of health, psycho-social risks and socio-economic outcomes (Macvarish, 2010). Those implementing the strategies saw as their 'enemy' not teenage mothers but those who were still wedded to old-fashioned sexual morality, represented most strongly by the Daily Mail (Hoggart, 2006). Policy-makers included in their strategy updates, evaluations of media attitudes, suggesting that part of the teenage pregnancy strategy's role was to move away from moralism regarded as outdated and alienating (Teenage Pregnancy Strategy Unit, 2005). Although the teenage mother was targeted to an extent that she had never been targeted before, this was conducted in a way that appeared to neutralise its stigmatising effects and within a context in which increasing numbers of parents have became the objects of policy attention and cultural concern. The teenage mother became the embodiment of acute parental deficiency against which other parents could measure themselves and through whom novel ways of policing the family could be forged.

4.8 There are two ineffectual parents in the contemporary 'story' of teenage pregnancy: the teenage mother and her own parents, who have been unable to protect her from sex, pregnancy and premature motherhood. The 'parenting deficit' is not just projected into the future, but into the past, as a causal factor in the pregnancy. High profile cases of extremely young pregnant teens serve to strengthen this portrayal of teenage pregnancy as a freak show of toxic parenting. It was notable that politicians such as Labour Children's Secretary Ed Balls and Conservative party leader and future Prime Minister David Cameron

chose to comment on the highly unusual and unrepresentative case of 'Alfie Patten, 13 year old dad' (The Sun, 14 February, 2009). The fact that the vast majority of teenage mothers are aged 17 -19 is occluded by these more sensational stories (TPSU, 2005; Duncan et al 2010). In cases such as these, the parents of teenage parents are portrayed as wilfully complicit and excessively liberal, for example by allowing young teens to have sex in the family home. The views and experiences of the parents of pregnant teenagers are under-researched and therefore only reflected through data collected with their daughters. What evidence there is suggests that parents are often profoundly disappointed by their daughter's pregnancy, but are, especially today, likely to be supportive of their daughter's choices, whether that is to terminate or proceed with the pregnancy (Macvarish and Billings, 2009; Lee et al 2010). However, in policy discussions, parents are more often cast as conservatives 'in denial' of teenage sexuality and therefore unwilling to acknowledge their daughters' needs for sexual information or as bewildered by the cultural and environmental pressures prematurely sexualising young people and therefore unable to communicate with their daughters about sex and contraception. Although the latter are viewed more sympathetically, they are nonetheless held responsible for Britain's relatively high teenage pregnancy rate and treated as a social problem in need of rectification through an expanded education programme for parents, equipping them with the 'skills and confidence' they require to talk their children through sexual development. Miriam Rosen, Ofsted's director of education, was quoted in the Times saying,

> No matter how difficult it may be, parents and teachers have to discuss sensitive issues with their children and pupils to help them make the right choices as they grow up. But we do think they need more guidance. Certainly teachers who have been specially trained are more confident. One practical suggestion is for parents to start talking to their children about what they have done at school and go from there. (The Times, 12 April 2007).

Once again, parents are placed in a secondary position in relation to child-rearing, this time to the 'specially trained' and 'confident' teachers.

4.9 The teenage mother has increasingly been used as a warning to children and young people about the dangers of sex. The misery of teenage motherhood has been emphasised in policy in such a way as to deter young people from having sex without contraception. The pitiable teenage mother, who loses her youthful body and her youthful 'lifestyle', suffers sleepless nights, the relentless demands of a baby and lives in penury, plays an important role in sex education programmes which use either 'robot' babies or peer-education by teenage mothers to deter young people from having sex or at least unprotected sex. Using this graphically negative version of teenage motherhood and, in fact, parenthood in general, as these experiences are not exclusive to young parents, suggests that parenthood is a 'nightmare' at any age. In the absence of religious morality or a commitment to sex within marriage, the rationale for restricting the sexuality of teenagers is extremely weak. The idea of parenthood as incredibly difficult is therefore used as a deterrent to sex or unprotected sex, alongside a risk-based morality of disease-prevention (Alldred and David, 2007) and a strong emphasis on the potential emotional risks of intimate relationships (BBC Online, 15 February, 2010). The idea of a deficit not just in parenting, but in intimate relationships more broadly, is strongly expressed, often in quite extreme and graphic ways, in contemporary attempts to control teenage sexuality and is most vividly embodied in the 'outcome' of the pitiable teenage mum.

Conclusion: Teenage motherhood and the infantilisation of parenthood

5.1 The idea of the teenage mother has gained symbolic power because parents, and particularly mothers, are increasingly defining their public identities with reference to their private choices in how they raise their children. Although these identities tend to be fragile because they are rooted in the individualised sphere of personal life, they derive strength from the collective meanings attached to them through the discourses of good and bad motherhood. The teenage mother, as the exemplar of poor parenthood is someone against whom a positive maternal identity can be formed. It has been argued here, that rather than just being marginalised or stigmatised, the teenage mother is also in fact, identified with as the archetype of a new version of parenthood. Identifying with the imagined difficulties of the teenage mother produces a tendency to affirm the idea that parenting is impossibly difficult for everybody, that it is to be expected that parents will sometimes act like children, and that raising children is a task that most ordinary adults require external support and expertise to perform adequately. Parenthood is no longer defined by an adult exercising responsibility for and authority over the moral development of their child, rather, it has become defined as requiring a strong identification *with* the child and a willingness to prioritise the child's immediate feelings over the wider concerns of adult life (James, 2010). By these criteria, it could be argued that the teenager, who has yet to develop public commitments or ambitions to distract her, is better suited to motherhood than the older middle-class mother who aspires to maintain a life beyond motherhood, provided she accepts her inherent parental shortcomings and accepts instruction from health and child-rearing professionals.

5.2 The strong cultural resonance with an image of the maternal or parental as defined not only by self-sacrifice but by difficulty, as the site where meaning for the individual is most strongly derived and where the most important 'work' of society is done, means that although teenage parenthood has been re-stigmatised in some ways, the cultural narrative within which this has been performed is also strongly affirmative, regardless of age or marital status, of the idea that all parents struggle to cope with the 'most difficult job in the world' and need expert guidance to remedy their inadequacies.

5.3 The field of parenting culture studies is developing some useful conceptual tools with which to explore particular sites where shifts in the definitions and practices of parenting are occurring. The peculiar prominence of the teenage mother in late twentieth century and early twenty-first century British political life suggests that she provides a locus for a number of intersecting anxieties and significant social developments. Although the discourse of teenage pregnancy appears to locate the problem 'over there', confined to a particular class or community, the fact that the idea of the teenage mother has acquired such a central position despite a decline in her actual prevalence, indicates that she is also identified with as

expressive of some important developments in the contemporary experience and meaning of parenthood.

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